



MATTHEW WAITE/DN  
**JAN BERRINGER'S MANTLE** is adorned in Husker memorabilia, from Brook's senior letter to miniature helmets and the photo she is holding from the Kick-off Classic in 1994.

# Berringer handles death with faith

**BERRINGER** from page 1

pilot error — a closed fuel valve — and high winds caused the Piper J-3 Cub to lose power and plummet into the ground.

Berringer and his girlfriend's brother, Tobey Lake, were killed instantly in the fiery crash.

Jan's memories of that day are both sad and angry. Because of her son's high profile, media interest in the crash was intense. Once word got out that it was a Husker in the pilot's chair, radios and televisions lit up with the story.

Around that time, Nicoel, Brook's older sister, was ready to sit down to dinner with her husband. She was in the kitchen when her husband called her into the living room saying ESPN had a story about her brother.

What they thought was a story about football turned out to be a story about her brother's death.

"I don't think she'll ever recover from that," Jan Berringer said. "It was devastating to her. What a shock turning it on the television."

Berringer's younger sister, Drue, was in class at Kansas State University when it happened. She walked back to her sorority house to find a group of women in her room. They told her to call home.

Jan was running errands, trying to get the house ready for an NFL draft party. They had food and family together and they had rented a satellite dish so they could get ESPN2, which was to broadcast the later rounds.

When Jan walked in the house, her sister told her that Football Coach Tom Osborne had called. There had been an accident.

The mother's first instinct was a knee injury, or an elbow. But when the coach called back and said he was on the way to an accident scene, she knew it wasn't an on-the-field injury.

Drue and Nicoel called in the meantime, but warned their mother not to turn on the television.

"I came that close to seeing it on the news myself," she said. "If (the media) knew at all how much pain that causes, to not let a family be together."

"I told (her daughters) to keep praying that Brook was OK and that Brook wasn't involved."

But it wasn't to be true. In a matter of moments, Jan said, she went from planning a draft party to planning a funeral.

She said the transition was almost seamless. There were things to be done, people to be called. There were plenty of tears, but there was work to do.

## A better place

On Friday, the family was taking care of arrangements when Jan felt kind of funny. She said she felt a weight being lifted off her shoulders.

Just then, the phone rang. It was Osborne, calling to tell her that there were many, many people praying for her. After Osborne, calls came from receivers Coach Ron Brown, and quarterbacks Coach Turner Gill, both reporting an outpouring of prayers and concerns.

"It was so obvious what was happening to us," Berringer said. "It was just so awesome."

"The power of prayer is so powerful."

Jan's transition may be indicative of the way she has dealt with grief throughout her life.

When her husband died in 1982, she dedicated herself to raising her children in the ways that she and Warren had laid out — high expectations, strong morals and compassion for all. She says she has not been disappointed in how her children have lived their lives.

When her mother went into the hospital this January, it was right around the time Jan was filling out her report cards for her second-grade class. Jan was at her mother's side that evening when the doctors decided she needed to go to a hospital in Denver or Wichita. Because of weather, she was rerouted to Wichita; because of her weak condition, she was flown back to Goodland.

Jan had gone back to the school to finish her report cards. When her mother's helicopter landed, Jan got a call to come back. An hour later, her mother was gone.

After she said her final goodbyes to her mother, Jan went back to the school at 3 a.m. to finish her report cards. In her mind, she knew that her mother was in a better place, and she was not sad.

"She saw a light and was looking at the ceiling," she said of her mother's last moments. "She just started to reach up."

"I looked up and I knew I was looking right into the face of an angel. I can't see it, but I know mom can."

## Keeping the faith

Faith has run strong for generations in both Jan and Warren Berringer's families, so strong that physical pain won't keep her from her spiritual life.

Jan broke her arm this Christmas Eve, but refused to go to the hospital before the evening service was over.

"It would be awful not to be there on Christmas Eve," she said.

Spirituality and compassion have been a key part in the upbringing of her children, Jan said. It also was a big part of her son's personality.

Brook, because of the time he spent in hospitals with his father before his death, often would go to nearby hospitals unannounced when he had a few minutes before a speaking engagement.

He would walk up to the nurses' station and

ask if anyone would like a visit from a Cornhusker — never did he hear a no, and never did he leave not feeling good.

"He learned a lot of adversity growing up," Jan said. "His dad was his best friend when he was a little boy. He saw a lot of hospitals, a lot of pain."

"His dad showed him how to get through a crisis."

There were several moments in Brook's young life that other children enjoyed at home: The boy experienced them at hospitals. Fun times, like Easter egg hunts, were held in the hospital yard.

"I think (Brook) had a special empathy for people having a hard time," his mother said. "Anything he could do to help."

## Power of the pen

After her son's death, Jan said she received dozens of letters from hospital nurses thanking her for the time her son spent in their hospital.

Thousands of letters poured in to her house. Amid the boxes and boxes of letters — some heartbreaking, some thankful, others supportive — Jan says she will try to write a thank-you note to them all.

The letters came from as far away as Bali, Indonesia and Canada. She has received calls from Japan, Turkey and Sweden.

The support of strangers has amazed her, helped her continue. And she is grateful of the support of those who knew her son.

Those she is most grateful for are those who encouraged her son toward his faith and toward study of the Bible.

Jan said she was happy her son came to Nebraska because she knew Osborne and Brown were men of strong character. She later learned that Berringer's position Coach Gill also was a man of faith.

Later in Brook's football career, Art Lindsay, a Lincoln man who authored the book, "One Final Pass," and eulogized the player at his funeral, came into the young man's life and helped Brook's studies of the Bible.

Osborne, standing on the Memorial Stadium turf he coached Berringer on when he was a player, said people often see the loss of a young person as a tragic one. But Berringer's death has caused many — from players on the team to people around the nation — to take a look inward, and enter a life of faith.

"We've been able to see that Brook's life wasn't in vain," the coach said. "He was the kind of guy who lived life the way it ought to be lived and you have to feel good about knowing a guy like that."



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN BERRINGER  
**THE BERRINGER CLAN** made its way to many games during Brook's career. Friends and family said he was always asking around for extra tickets so his family could see him play.

## Guidance through grief

Because of his spiritual beliefs, Jan Berringer, Osborne and Gill all said they will see their son, student and friend again in heaven.

"I know he's there," Gill said. "That's what is so comforting."

Gill said his faith carries him through hard times. When times are good, he thanks God, and when they aren't, he asks for guidance.

Faith is an everyday part of his life, Gill said, and it influences everything he does, from living to coaching.

And, Gill said, Brook's faith has been an influence on others.

"Yeah, Brook's not here, but he's touched so many people's lives since he died because he lived for Christ," he said. "And he touched people when he was here."

"If we can leave, and continue to touch people's lives, I think that pleases God."

For Jan Berringer, her mind is on today, and her heart is looking toward a reunion. Her son had faith, as did her husband and mother, and they are together now.

But she still feels the loss. "I can't stand not having him here," the mother said. "I miss him a little more each day. I know from losing Warren that that's the way it's going to be."

"I have that wonderful knowledge that I know where he is and I will get to see him again. That's how I can get through this."